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Conference Abstract

Reducing the Pain of Getting your Backlog Published

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Abstract

Discussions about the need to document and describe collections at a gross level have been in progress for at least two decades. The original form was the 2008 Natural Collection Description (NCD), which was never ratified. Although a number of implementations were set up using it, it was by and large, acknowledged to be cumbersome and out-of-date even at inception. Over the past three years there has been a concerted effort by the Collection Description Standard (CD) Interest Group to rationalise and create a practical and usable formulation. This presentation describes its use to document the real collections of the Field Museum.

We attempted to model a set of Collections Description records by using a range of organizational levels within the Field Museum Collections, beginning at the institution-level by referencing the "Field Museum of Natural History" Global Registry of Scientific Collections (GrSciColl) record, and including its departments (e.g., "Zoology Collections"), collections (e.g., "Invertebrates Collection"), and more specific accessions (e.g., "Philip Carpenter Collection"). We then added our modeled records to a CD Wikibase site developed by Maarten Trekels to see how the CD standard could work in that system. No underlying structure was in place in Wikibase, and this allowed us to compare interpretations. It became clear very soon into the process that it was imperative to understand and clearly map out the connections between records at the different levels before attempting data entry. It was not a fun surprise as an afterthought and so systems

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built to implement this standard will need clear guidance on preparatory steps for data validation.

In some cases, data fit easily into the CD fields as defined, but others were more complex to think about and manipulate. Further issues included fields duplicated unnecessarily between dimensions, and some fields missing entirely. It was also difficult to compare and match newly defined terms for describing the standard (e.g., Dimension and Class) with terms defined by Wikibase (e.g., Item and property). Some aspects of the standard were confusing especially where museum concept and research needs were less than obviously aligned. Ultimately we need something useful for researchers and understandable by Collection staff.

Overall, documentation beyond plain field definitions needs to be included with the release of the standard. It should contain, but not be limited to, required core fields, fields needed to create hierarchical relationships, definitions of the difference between hierarchical and lateral relationships and resource roles associated with dimensions. Examples are also needed regarding how to plan and structure CD records that represent a complex collection. We foresee a need for extensive documentation to spare users difficulty and ultimately make the standard more usable.

Keywords

collection descriptions, TDWG, data standards, biodiversity, geodiversity, natural sciences, collections

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